Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

If You Were an Ancient Egyptian
What Would You Have Eaten?

Have you ever thought about how the food that people eat has changed over thousands of years? This memorial to an ancient Egyptian called Setha, or Setja, gives us some clues about the food of ancient Egyptians.

Egyptian, ca. 2134–2040 BCE, First Intermediate Period,
Stele of Setha (or Setja),
Limestone, polychrome,
The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 61.40

A stele is stone slab that has been set up as a monument.

The inscriptions on this stele read: "An offering that the king gives and Anubis, who is upon his mountain, who is in bandages, lord of the holy land the [necropolis], [consisting of] an invocation offering for the count, the honored one of Setja."

The offerings in front of Setja include meat, onions, two fowls, and jugs for drinks. Carved and painted stelai (stone slabs) containing prayers to Anubis, the Egyptian god of mummification and the afterlife, were typically set into the walls of simple mud-brick chapels in the tomb's outer chambers.

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Take a look at the list below and check the items you think might have been found on the dinner plate of an ancient Egyptian.

- Ducks
- Radishes
- Cane sugar
- Chocolate
- Dates
- Grapes
- Onions
- Bread
- Turkey
- Fish
- Cucumbers
- Olives
- Potatoes
- Tomatoes

Answers: The Ancient Egyptians would have eaten ducks, radishes, dates, grapes, onions, bread, fish, cucumbers and olives. They would not have eaten cane sugar, chocolate, turkey, potatoes, or tomatoes.

Ancient Egyptians Did Eat:

Duck: Many kinds of poultry and wild fowl were eaten in ancient Egypt. The marshy areas along the Nile provided an excellent habitat for these creatures. There are many references in wall paintings and texts to the preparation of ducks, geese, quail, and cranes for eating. The chicken, on the other hand, was a late arrival. There are a few early examples of chickens kept as curiosities, but they were not widespread until the Ptolemaic era.

Radishes, onions and cucumbers: All of these vegetables were grown in ancient Egypt. Radishes were rarely eaten raw. Apparently, the large varieties grown in the ancient world caused gas. However, the oil extracted from their seeds was highly prized. Onions made a tasty, aromatic addition to a meal. Cucumbers were also welcome additions to the Egyptian menu.

Olives: These fruits were eaten directly as food, but were also valued as the source of olive oil. Olive oil was used in cooking, in medicine, as fuel for lamps, and even as a preservative. Olive oil was traded as a commodity throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

Dates: These fruits were an excellent source of both sugar and protein. The Egyptian word for date was bener, which also meant “sweet” or “pleasant.” Poorer Egyptians used dates in place of the more costly honey.

Grapes: These fruits of the vine were an important source of sugar and sweetener in ancient Egypt. They also provided the raw material for the wine that the ancient Egyptians drank.

Bread: This food was the staple of life in ancient Egypt for rich and poor alike. Bread was made from both wheat and barley. It was baked in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes it was sweetened with honey or fruit. The grain was usually ground into flour using stone grinders. The process left small bits of stone in the flour, which was not sieved or milled. Eating the resulting bread led to lots of wear and tear on the teeth of the ancient Egyptians.

Fish: The ancient Egyptians caught and consumed many kinds of fish, which were plentiful in the Nile. Fish were eaten grilled, in fish soup, and were even made into fish balls. They were also dried and salted.

Ancient Egyptians Did Not Eat:

Cane sugar: The harvesting of sugar cane originated in India, but didn't spread into the western parts of the world until about 3 B.C. It was used only as a medicine in the west until after tea and coffee were introduced there at the beginning of the 17th century.

Chocolate: The cacao bean from which chocolate is made is native to the Western Hemisphere. Columbus brought cacao beans back to Spain from the Caribbean islands.

Turkey: This large game bird is native to North America. The Mexican variety was introduced into Europe by Spanish explorers in the early 1500s.

Potatoes: These root vegetables were cultivated by the Incas and other natives of the New World. They were introduced into Europe by the Spanish explorers, where they eventually became an important crop—especially in Ireland and Russia.

Tomatoes: The tomato is native to Central America, but the plant had spread both north and south by the time of the voyages of Columbus. Tomatoes were first introduced into Spain in Eurasia, but Italians were the first Europeans to use them extensively in cooking.

Sources:

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